The Grief Work Companion
Activities for Healing

by Fran Zamore, MSW, ACSW & Ester R.A. Leutenberg

Illustrated by
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A self-help workbook for coping with grief and loss
DEDICATION

The GriefWork Companion ~ Activities for Healing

is dedicated to the memory of

Joseph D. Zamore, Mae R. & Herman Zelikow,
Mitchell A. Leutenberg, Ethyl & Meyer Atkin and Alter Gottlieb
whom we continue to love, and who continue to inspire us.

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Safe Journey

I had thought that your death was a waste and a destruction, a pain of grief hardly to be endured.

I am only beginning to learn that your life was a gift and a growing and a loving left with me.

The desperation of death destroyed the existence of love, but the fact of death cannot destroy what has been given.

I am learning to look at your life again instead of your death and your departing.

~ Marjorie Pizer
Introduction

to
The GriefWork Companion
~ Activities for Healing

This section provides important background information.

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We have no right to ask,
when sorrow comes, “Why did this happen to me?”
unless we ask the same question
for every moment of happiness that comes our way.

~ Anonymous
About The GriefWork Companion ~ Activities for Healing

Through our work and drawing from our personal experiences, we have become fully aware of the complexities associated with grieving. We live in a society where people are expected to ‘get-over’ their loss quickly and we understand this is not realistic. We know there are many ways that people grieve and we support each person’s right to grieve in an individual and unique fashion.

The GriefWork Companion was developed to help men and women heal from their losses. Everyone experiences loss. We refer to the process of coping with a significant loss as grief work. The typical range of behaviors, emotions and attitudes is varied. Throughout the book we try to convey that everyone’s grief has a unique expression.

The GriefWork Companion contains activities and thought-provoking quotations as well as educational and journaling pages. Not all activities are applicable for everyone. Use those which seem appropriate and relevant for you.

Journaling is a time-honored way to help people sort out their thoughts and feelings. Many different techniques can be used to begin a journaling practice. One way is to set aside some time each day – maybe 15 to 30 minutes in the morning – to simply write whatever comes to mind. Another way is to pick up a journal and write when you have a ‘thinking loop’ that seems stuck. In the act of writing, often the thought or situation will lose its intensity. Some people find that journaling is a substitute for ‘talking’ and others use their journals as a way of writing letters to the person who is no longer present. Journaling can be just as effective if it is brief, or if it is lengthy, as long as it reflects how you are currently feeling.

Many people find that they are surprised at how their thinking has evolved when they re-read their journals. For most people the changes that they are experiencing are subtle. Often people grieving do not realize the hard work that they have done, nor do they recognize the changes they have made. Re-reading a journal can provide an opportunity for self-appreciation.
Journaling

Ideas can come from anywhere and at any time.

The problem with making mental notes is that the ink fades very rapidly.

~ Rolf Smith

Journal writing is a voyage to the interior.

~ Christina Baldwin
The Grief Experience

One of the important aspects of grieving that has been largely overlooked is the relational aspect. Each person's grief is unique because the person . . .

- Had a unique relationship with the deceased (loving, ambivalent, challenging)
- Brings a unique personality and way of coping to the situation
- Has a particular world view which will impact how to enter the process
- Has ongoing relationships which may or may not be helpful
- Has a unique attitude about death
- Came to this particular loss with a personal history of dealing with earlier losses
- Has particular expectations about what dealing with the loss means and wonders how to proceed

The grieving process can occur with many types of losses; although we focus on loss by death, the concepts presented can be applied to other losses. See pages 12 and 13 for a partial listing of other losses.

We view the grieving experience as a long, winding path that curves back on itself, traverses hills and valleys and has many obstacles. It is a path that is challenging to negotiate and time-consuming to travel along. This provides opportunities for personal and spiritual growth. Because grieving is part of the human experience, a person attached to someone will mourn the loss of that relationship and miss that person's physical presence. We understand this as a simple truth. Remembering this truth helps some people cope with the loss because they are able to be somewhat philosophical.

The process may be more complicated when the relationship with the deceased was either ambivalent or challenging. The reality for most people is that relationships are not easy to put into categories. Most long-standing relationships are at times loving, at times ambivalent and at times challenging. The degree of challenge will likely add to the complex feelings that the person who is grieving will experience. Along with the death of the person, the bereaved may also grieve the reality of needs that were not met with that person during his/her lifetime.
Definitions

LOSS refers to no longer having somebody or something.

GRIEF is the universal response to any loss.

BEREAVEMENT refers to the experience of the loss of someone through death.

MOURNING refers to the expression of grief in culturally specific ways.

Kinds of Losses

Loss is a part of everyone’s life at one point or another. Each individual reacts to a loss in a personal way. As well as the emotional-evoking responses, loss also has physical, intellectual, behavioral, social and philosophical dimensions. Response to loss is varied and influenced by beliefs and practices.

People’s losses, no matter who or what, are important and often devastating to them. They represent the disappearance of someone or something cherished.

Some examples of loss:

- Addiction
- Break Up/Divorce
- Death
- Employment
- End of a relationship
- Failed business venture
- Faith
- Financial security
- Health
- Home
- Independence
- Mental ability
- Pet
- Physical ability
- Plans, hopes and dreams
- Role in life
- Sense of safety/security
- Status
- Treasured possessions
Disenfranchised Grief

Disenfranchised grief refers to grief experiences not openly acknowledged, socially accepted or publicly mourned. Several circumstances may contribute to this phenomenon:

- The relationship is not recognized or validated, i.e., friend, co-worker, former spouse, in-law, same-sex partner, lover
- The loss is not recognized, i.e., prenatal (miscarriage, stillborn, abortion), infant death, aged parent, pet
- The person grieving is not acknowledged, i.e., young children, people with developmental disabilities, elderly with dementia
- Unusual circumstances of the death, i.e., suicide, violence, accident
- The stigma of mental illness, suicide, AIDS, alcoholism or drug addiction

Talking with a trusted friend or professional can be helpful for a person suffering from disenfranchised grief. One should not underestimate the value of having support during this healing journey.

“every society has norms that frame grieving . . .
When a family member dies, one is allowed and expected to grieve, often in a specified way.
Yet human beings . . . harbor attachments to fellow humans, animals and even places and things.
In situations (which are outside the grieving rules) . . . the person experiences a loss, but the resulting grief is unrecognized by others. The person has no socially accorded right to grieve that loss or mourn it in a particular way, the grief is disenfranchised”

~ Disenfranchised Grief
by Kenneth J. Doka, PhD
What I Learned About Grief

Today it’s called “Disenfranchised Grief.” In 1995 I called it lonely.

My mother lived with our family for 35 years. I call my husband a Saint for many reasons, but that’s at the top of the list. Mom was a charitable woman who had an unhappy childhood. She was a self-concerned woman. When my boyfriend, the Saint, was 16, she asked him never to allow me to put her in a skilled care facility. As her Alzheimer's was progressing we knew we had no choice. And of course, she was angry – actually furious – at me, her only child.

After a few months, she stopped yelling and biting me, and didn’t know anyone or where she was. For two years she screamed at everyone or no one – just screamed. I went to the facility twice a day for those two years, mainly to make sure she was being well cared for, which was no pleasure for her caregivers. I was tired, worn down and so very sad. My worse moment was when she stopped caring that the baseball game was on – her favorite! Her dignity and pride were gone. It was terrible. Alzheimer's is an awful disease.

After two weeks of watching her lie in bed, not opening her eyes, her nurse said to her, “It’s OK to let go” and she sat up, opened her eyes and said “I’ll die when I’m damn well ready,” lay back down and died two weeks later. Earlier in the day that she died I had spent hours with the Alzheimer’s unit administrator arguing. They were keeping her alive and I felt it was torturing her. We had all of the proper papers, I was her guardian – but this administrator’s religious beliefs had kept my mom alive for those many weeks.

About 5 o’clock p.m. I received a phone call that my mom had died. My husband was at a business meeting. No cell phones. I had NO idea of where he was. I called my three daughters and they were all busy and unavailable to join me. In fairness to them, we all knew this was coming and they probably thought I could handle this alone, just as I had always handled everything, and I would be fine. Because my mother was 89 years old, and had lived a full life, I believe that it was expected that I would not need the support that one would usually receive for a loved one. But in truth, I wasn't fine. So I went alone to say goodbye to my mom. I kissed her and told her she put up a great fight, (she did NOT want to die!) and that her hands and her skin were still beautiful. I told that I loved her.

I NEVER felt so lonely in my life. Not when my father died when I was 15 years old, not when my son died by suicide, not ever. I wasn’t angry – I was hurting. Even when my husband came home, even the next day when the girls came over, I felt like no one ‘got it.’ I felt so lonely. I’ve forgiven them – but there is no way I can forget that feeling of being so very alone. Though she was almost ninety, though she was a pain sometimes, though she had dementia, though for years she was not “my mom,” I had now lost my mother.

I guess this is disenfranchised grief.

~ Anonymous
When to Seek Additional Support

This book is designed to help you deal with usual or common grief reactions. The pain, loneliness, sadness and distress that accompany grief are to be expected. Asking for and accepting additional support is a positive action that can truly be beneficial. You may want to seek out the help of friends, family, physicians, clergy and/or mental health professionals.

By its very nature, grieving is isolating. When we grieve we often are alone with our thoughts and memories. Although grief reactions are universal, most individuals feel alone and do not think others experience similar feelings. We strongly encourage anyone who is grieving to seek out a support group. Not all groups are created equal. Use your good judgment and participate in a group that feels comfortable and safe for you; where you feel supported and connected to others. The benefits of having time set aside to be with and talk with others, about the grieving experience can be enormous, giving you an emotional connection that may be valuable to improve your mood and attitude, and to decrease emotional distress.

Please recognize that symptoms of clinical depression and grieving are very similar. Sleep disturbances, appetite changes and intense sadness are common to both depression and grief. Depression is also characterized by a significant loss of self-esteem, a symptom not particularly common in usual grief reactions. If you are having prolonged periods of inability to manage daily tasks of living, if you feel hopeless and helpless and/or are preoccupied with guilt, it would be wise to consult with a mental health professional.

If you have suicidal thoughts you should seek professional help immediately. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline telephone number is 1-800-273-8255.

(Continued on the next page)
When to Seek Additional Support (Continued)

People experiencing very difficult grief reactions, clinical depression or other significant mental health issues need to seek qualified professional help. Many factors may contribute to complicating grief, which can cause complicated grief reactions. These reactions are all legitimate.

Some contributing factors:

• An estranged or overly dependent relationship with the deceased
• Your own underlying mental health issues
• Social isolation
• Sudden and traumatic circumstances of the death
• Concurrent life crisis which may lead to a delayed grief reaction
• Personal history of poor coping with prior losses
• Substance abuse or addictions of any kind
• Disenfranchised grief (page 13)

Be aware that these complicating factors do not necessarily lead to complicated grief – they are ‘red flags.’

Pay attention to the degree and duration of your intense sadness when determining if you think you are suffering from a complicated grief or depression. If, over time (months, not weeks) your grief symptoms are not lessening, seek support. Healing is a long, slow process. Be gentle with yourself and do not rush the process. If you are uncomfortable, seek support and the help you need.
Continuing Bonds
(After-Death Communications – Extraordinary Experiences)

The idea of continuing bonds after the death of a loved one is fascinating. Many people maintain their connection by sharing memories, continuing particular activities and/or memorializing their loved one in a variety of ways.

Dreaming, sensing the loved one’s presence, smelling a particular fragrance, having the sensation of being gently touched, are some examples of continuing bonds that are referred to as after-death communications or extraordinary experiences. These phenomena are fairly common and experienced as pleasant, positive, loving encounters. However, not everyone experiences these events.

Often times, people who have extraordinary experiences or after death communications with their loved ones are uncomfortable discussing them with others. If you have had any such experiences, you may want to journal about them.

Life After Death

The things I know:
   How the living go on living
   and how the dead go on living with them
so that in a forest
   even a dead tree casts a shadow
   and the leaves fall one by one
and the branches break in the wind
and the bark peels off slowly
and the trunk cracks
   and the rain seeps in through the cracks
and the trunk falls to the ground
and the moss covers it
   and in the spring the rabbits find it
and build their nest inside
and have their young
and their young will live safely
inside the dead tree
so that nothing is wasted in nature
   or in love.

~ Laura Gilpin
How Do You Handle Adversity?
Are you a Carrot, an Egg or a Coffee Bean?

A young woman went to her mother and told her about her life and how things were so hard for her. She did not know how she was going to make it and wanted to give up. She was tired of fighting and struggling. It seemed as one problem was solved, a new one arose.

Her mother took her in the kitchen. She filled three pots with water and placed each on a high fire. Soon the pots came to a boil. In the first, she placed carrots, in the second she placed eggs, and the last she placed ground coffee beans. She let them sit and boil, without saying a word.

In about twenty minutes, she turned off the burners. She fished the carrots out and placed them in a bowl. She pulled the eggs out and placed them in a bowl. Then she ladled the coffee out and placed it in a bowl.

Turning to her daughter, she asked, “Tell me, what do you see?”

“Carrots, eggs and coffee,” she replied. Her mother brought her closer and asked her to feel the carrots. She did and noted that they were soft. The mother then asked her to take an egg and break it. After pulling off the shell, she observed the hard boiled egg. Finally, the mother asked the daughter to sip the coffee. The daughter smiled, as she tasted it and noticed its rich aroma. The daughter then asked, “What does it mean, Mother?”

She explained that each of these objects had faced the same adversity – boiling water. Each reacted differently. The carrot went in strong, hard, and unrelenting. However, after being subjected to the boiling water, it softened and became weak. The egg had been fragile. Its thin outer shell had protected its liquid interior, but after sitting in boiling water, its insides became hardened. The round coffee beans were unique, however. After they were in the boiling water, they had changed the water.

“What are you?” she asked her daughter. “When adversity knocks on your door, how do you respond? Are you a carrot, an egg or a coffee bean?”

Think of this: Which are you? Are you the carrot that seems strong, but with pain and adversity do you wilt, become soft and lose your strength? Are you the egg that starts with a malleable heart, but changes with the heat? Do you have a fluid spirit, but after a death, breakup, a financial hardship, or some other trial, have you become hardened and stiff? Does your shell look the same, but on the inside are you bitter and tough, with a stiff spirit and hardened heart?

Or are you like the coffee bean? The bean actually changed the hot water, the very circumstances that bring the pain. When the water gets hot, it releases the fragrance and the flavor. If you are like the bean, when things are at their worst you get better and change the situation around you. When the hour is the darkest and trials are their greatest, do you elevate yourself to another level? How do you handle adversity? Are you a carrot, an egg or a coffee bean?

~ Anonymous
Your Healing Journey

As you embark on the activities in this book, you will find it useful to have a separate journal to continue recording your thoughts and feelings.

We wish you well on your healing journey.

People in Mourning

People in mourning have to come to grips with death before they can live again.

Mourning can go on for years and years.

It doesn’t end after a year; that’s a false fantasy.

It usually ends when people realize that they can live again, that they can concentrate their energies on their lives as a whole, and not on their hurt, and guilt, and pain.

~ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross
To Find a Safe Journey

To find a safe journey
through grief to growth
does not mean one should forget the past.
It means that on the journey
we will need safe pathways
so that remembrance,
which may be painful,
is possible.

~ Donna O’ Toole